Doing AIDS Justice

Laura Whitehorn dials up John Morgan Wilson, who takes a noir look at the HIV blues in his latest Benjamin Justice mystery.

December 1, 2000 By Laura Whitehorn

The muggy summer was still hanging around like the unpaid balance on a Visa statement the September day that *POZ* finally got a bead on John Morgan Wilson. We knew he'd spill the beans to us; his story was right up *POZ's* grimy back alley: the guy has written four mysteries set in Los Angeles with a gay narrator, Benjamin Justice, who not only covers AIDS as a reporter and pens a TV documentary on barebacking but, in the new volume, The Limits of Justice, comes to grips with his own HIV diagnosis. Wilson was at his desk in West Hollywood sleuthing for Court TV's *Anatomy of Crime* series when the phone rang.

***POZ:* Was writing these policiers a choice or a compulsion?**

John Morgan Wilson: [Sighs deeply.]

I never meant to write a series with AIDS as a theme. I started out working on an entertaining, light, commercial series. But from the first line this voice from my past took over, and the whole thing became much darker and edgier. I had planned to mention AIDS for realism, but the damn stuff took over. A lot of us came through the '80s haunted by the epidemic, whether or not we were infected ourselves. My lover got sick and died in '87, and I was writing from all that stored-up grief and anger. It poured itself into the book. I couldn't escape it.

Did particular events in your own life shape Ben Justice's story?

After the first book, Simple Justice, came out in '96, I thought I'd tone it down. But then the second wave of the epidemic started, and the wonder drugs didn't turn out to be the miracle we hoped they'd be. I wrote the third book, Justice at Risk, out of anger, when the barebacking issue was hot and anyone who questioned the practice was labeled a neo-Nazi. I was marching in the streets for gay rights in 1972, when it wasn't fun or fashionable, and here we were killing each other through unprotected sex. I also know people who test positive but can't deal with it, and that wrote itself into my new book, the fourth.

How do readers respond to Justice and his torments?

A doctor told me the new book is off base because no one is in denial anymore—people are all taking the cocktails. But that's a medical and intellectual viewpoint, whereas getting HIV is emotional and visceral. One guy from the Midwest wrote me to say he'd just tested positive before he read the book, and he took hope from Ben Justice's story, because he'd responded the same way. When I read at A Different Light [a gay bookstore in West Hollywood] last week, a woman told me, "I totally identified with what Justice went through. I didn't want to tell anyone when I tested positive, either."

Am I projecting, or are you trying to do a bit of AIDS education through this mystery series?

I wrote the latest book not to discourage anyone from getting treatment, but to get the truth out and help people face it. The new drugs aren't a panacea. We're starting to see people get sick again, or get sick from side effects. If anything, through the publication of this novel and reviewers writing about it, I hope we can make the point that there are still so many people impacted by AIDS—and that this is still a terrifying disease.

Excerpt from *The Limits of Justice*
By John Morgan Wilson
Doubleday
320pp., $22.95

It's never been too difficult bumping into murder in Los Angeles. Not when at least one or two residents get rubbed out every day, and your closest friend is a crime reporter for the Los Angeles Times, and your own background is as darkly stained with violent death as a coroner's report printed with cheap ink.

When you've got all that going for you, felony homicide has a way of finding you in the City of Angels—even in neighboring West Hollywood, the cozy little community shaped on the map like a submachine gun that I call home sweet home. Sometimes, another case of murder walks right up and knocks on your door, the way it happened one gray March morning when Charlotte Preston came seeking my services.

"Benjamin Justice?"

She tapped her delicate knuckles three times against the warped wood that framed the dirty screen, a dim figure peering in, trying to find me in the two-room apartment.

"Mr. Justice, your friend Alexandra suggested I contact you. I've left
several messages."

"Yes, I know."

She pressed her face closer, squinting, with the fingers of her left hand held across her forehead like a Girl Scout's salute. It was the face of a thirty-something woman, fair in complexion and pretty in a conventional way. The features included a small, pleasant mouth, nicely upturned nose, faint blush to the softly arched cheeks, earnest amber eyes under big lashes that sought me out a little too desperately for my comfort. Over her curling auburn hair, she wore a knit cap of bright chartreuse that tried awfully hard to look jaunty and hip.

"Might I come in for a moment?"

I sat on the bare floor across the messy room, leaning against the wall, in a veil of shadow undisturbed by the gloomy outside.

"I'm not dressed for visitors. But, then, I rarely am."

"My name's Charlotte Preston. I—"

"Yes, I know."

"Of course. The phone messages."

"Something about a writing job."

I saw her head turn this way and that, as if someone might be listening.

"I'd prefer to speak to you more privately."

"I haven't showered or shaved."

"That's not a problem, Mr. Justice."

"I haven't brushed my teeth for awhile."

"Your friend Alexandra warned me that you might be reluctant to see me."

"I stink, Miss Preston."

"She told me you've been out of work for some time."

"The least of my bad habits."

"She said you've been going through a rough period."

"Will you do me a favor, Miss Preston?"

“If I can.”

“Go away.”

She hesitated, as if she might actually turn and depart, as if simple decency compelled her to honor my request. But simple decency rarely wins out against a burning desire for vengeance, which happened to be in Charlotte Preston’s heart that bleak morning.

Her tone became more businesslike.

“I’m prepared to offer you a substantial amount of money.” […]

When Charlotte Preston was gone, I climbed into the shower and let the hot water stream down on me, and began to shake all over.

I’d tested positive for HIV roughly a year before and still hadn’t pulled myself back together—still hadn’t come to terms with the stark realization that the virus was in my system, that there was nothing I could do to turn back the clock, undo the damage. When the test results came back on that life-changing afternoon, my reaction had been to plunge into a six-month drinking binge of blindness, fury and fear. My tequila holiday had ended abruptly half a year later with the death of Harry Brofsky, once my editor and mentor at the Los Angeles Times, whose career I’d ruined along with my own. He’d withered away after a paralyzing stroke and finally died in his sleep without my saying good-bye because I was locked up in my apartment with the shades drawn and my phone off the hook, feeling sorry for myself while I worked my way to the bottom of another bottle. The shame of that had jarred me off the booze, but when the blessed alcohol was gone, I was left with little more than the growing awareness of the virus inside me, slowly devouring my immune system cell by cell, and a life in front of me that veered wildly in my fevered imagination between hopelessness and horror.

So I’d remained locked up in the same apartment where my lover Jacques had slowly died not quite a decade ago, from the same virus that now coursed through my veins. Month after month I’d stayed shut in alone, losing weight, enduring minor rashes and low-grade fevers, unwilling to seek treatment. The new therapies for HIV worked for many but not for all and came with potentially debilitating side effects, but that wasn’t the reason I avoided getting help. Starting treatment would be an acknowledgment that I’d finally joined the legions of the infected, and I wasn’t ready to face that truth just yet.

The hours after midnight were always the worst, when every possible manner of suicide ran through my mind. Over and over the suicide tapes played in my head, until I’d envisioned every method, every move, down to the last detail, giving me options for escape, a sense of control. Each time I closed my eyes, the tapes began playing automatically, as if rewound and cued up from the night before. It had gone on like that, through the winter and into spring, until this morning, when Charlotte Preston had come tapping on my door, turning upside down my already darkly unsettled

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